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What Becomes a Legend Most?

The story has become the stuff of Sandinista legend. It was 1978, and Nora Astorga was an attractive young lawyer sympathetic to the Nicaraguan revolutionaries. She was also the object of an ardent suit by Gen. Reynaldo Pérez Vega, the No. 2 officer in Anastasio Somoza Debayle's National Guard and a man whose notorious human-rights violations had earned him the nickname "El Perro"—"The Dog." One day Astorga left a message at Pérez's office. "Tell the general that something he's . . . been asking for for so long could be today," she said. "Just tell him I'll be here at home." Legend has it that when the general arrived, Astorga sent his bodyguard out to buy cigarettes. Then, after he had shed his pistol, she signaled to two guerrillas hiding in her bedroom closet. The rebels slipped up from behind and slit the general's throat while Astorga held him in her arms.

Since the revolution Astorga has held several high government posts, and last week she said the Sandinistas planned to nominate her as Nicaragua's new ambassador to the United States. The news sent shudders through the Reagan administration. "A woman with a terrorist background like hers is not suitable material for an ambassadorship," said one administra-

tion official. "She was engaged in some pretty grisly activities." The appointment was particularly offensive to the CIA. Intelligence sources said that Pérez had served as a CIA "asset" during the revolution—and the Company was clearly in no mood to endorse someone who had terminated one of its informants.

Agreement: How the controversy will turn out remained to be seen. According to normal procedure, the Sandinistas would send a note to the administration asking for *agrément*—or formal acceptance of Astorga as the new ambassador. Washington would then be free either to give consent or to withhold it. As a hard-line Sandinista, Astorga would prove a harsh critic of administration policies. But rejecting a proposed ambassador is seldom done in the polite world of diplomacy. The situation was made even more delicate by the fact that the Sandinistas recently gave quick approval to the appointment of Harry Bergold Jr. to replace Anthony Quainton as U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua. "We are awaiting an answer from the State Department," said Astorga.

Astorga has given her own version of what happened to Pérez. In a 1980 interview with *Nicarahuac*, a magazine published by the Nicaraguan Culture Ministry, Astorga did



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Astorga: A murderous rendezvous

admit to luring the general to her residence with the suggestive message. But she insisted that the Sandinistas only planned to kidnap him and hold him for political ransom. Then, she said, the plan misfired. Pérez resisted, and the guerrillas killed him. Whatever the case, they left no doubt about who had committed the murder. They left Pérez's body in Astorga's bedroom, draped in a black-and-red Sandinista flag.

CRAIG CANINE with JOSEPH CONTRERAS in Managua and ZOFIA SMARDZ in Washington